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One trait of the ideology of relevance is "external justification," which requires that curricula and courses be justified through their contributions to the amelioration or elimination of social or political evil. Another trait is "tactical redescription," which redefines some fundamental qualities of education as being of positive disvalue. Humanistic studies (history, philosophy, literature and the fine arts) are special targets and victims of the ideology of relevance. They have been viewed as having something important to do with the expression and communication of human values, therefore if what is wrong with our society is the scheme of values to which we subscribe, then humanistic studies should be the educational fulcrum to bring about social change. The methods of inquiry used in humanistic studies are less subject to codification than those to be found in the factual sciences. Because of this it is easy to manipulate the humanities in the interests of fulfilling political objectives. Institutions of higher learning may find it difficult to stand their ground since many academics sympathize with the political goals of relevance ideologists and cannot bring themselves to reject the educational demands they bring to higher education out of the fear that by rejecting them they will be thought of as having repudiated the political goals. It would seem that there are no changes that can satisfy what is demanded by the relevance ideologists and at the same time preserve the intellectual inquiry of humanistic studies. (WM)

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ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES

55th Annual Meeting
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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Analyst's paper for
Discussion Group VII
Wednesday, January 15. 1969
9:00 a.m.

Group VII -- What is the Impact of the Social Revolution on Humanistic Studies?

by

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The topic to which I have been assigned comes as a question: What is the impact of the Social Revolution on Humanistic Studies? I will begin by being ungracious and barking a little at the question. Then I will propose a substitute, and devote the time that remains to the beginning of an answer.

First, the barking. The question as originally formulated I find unacceptable because it implies a statement about whose truth I have considerable doubt and to which I would be committed if I were to attempt an answer. It implies, at least, that 1969 is a year of social revolution, the problem of the discussant being then to examine its effects upon the collection of disciplines (history, literature, philosophy, the fine arts) of which the customary generic label is Humanistic Studies. There are two reasons as to why the assumption should be called into question. One is factual, the other, tactical. I shall discuss both of them briefly.

First, there is an unremitting though frequently unwarranted tendency for the contemporaries of a given society to see it in revolutionary dislocation and themselves in crisis, that tendency being virtually as pervasive as the fabled explanation which customarily accompanies it, i.e., the middle class has been rising. Whether it be Hesiod, the Pseudo-Xenephon, Bernard of Clairvaux, or the Journal of General Education, society is seen as teetering -- the moral fabric corrupt, the hopes dim, the remedies, if any there be, drastic.

It is instructive to find in the first issue of the Journal of General Education, 1945, these remarks about an era which we may now remember as one of near dull tranquillity. On the view of a Mr. Hansen, "The frustration in America today is so critical that if it continues we are in danger of becoming demoralized as a democratic people . . . the gap between totalitarianism and democracy is very narrow indeed. So narrow that we could wake up any morning to discover that someone has decided to close the gap." Or, "The trivialized mind is supine, at the mercy of slick manipulators. The outcome can be generations of dehumanized social animals in place of self-controlled, self-judging, self-ruling men and women. . . .The current crisis, to sum up, is cultural. One part of man's capacities, science, over-suddenly developed, has drained the life temporarily from even more necessary abilities, the humanities." This, according to I. A. Richards. Or, "Clearly we are all insane. This is neither an exaggeration nor a figure of speech." Finally, "We are keeping open only that part of our minds which allows us to live in complacency. Ours is becoming the way of resignation. Unchanged it will become the way of suicide, of murder."

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My moral is not that 1945 was free of problems, but that at that time, as at any other, those who are most concerned with, and affected by, them are frequently in the worst possible position to judge their gravity. It, of course, may be right for this conference to think of the problems of the latter part of the twentieth century as reflecting changes so rapid, so radical, so wide-sweeping that they amount to nothing less than a "social revolution." We no doubt feel them to be revolutionary, but we do not know them to be revolutionary, and it will be some time before we do know. That is my factual bark at the topic. Now for the tactical one.

The kind of political rhetoric that we use to talk about large social movements can affect the way we behave toward them. Revolutions are pretty wild things, hard to control, therefore, always unpredictable and possibly destructive. When we refer to something as "revolution," we make it by definition a pretty wild thing, something which depending upon the social actors involved can lead them to become overly exhilirated or overly frightened. On the first response, the tendency, if what we face is called "revolution," is to say we must be tough-minded, face the facts, give up our romantic nostalgia for a past now irrecoverable, and not only ride the new wave into the future but turn our energies to directing it so that wherever it goes we will be there first. On the other hand, if we dislike what is happening and if it be revolution, the tendency is to think of it as a hopeless mess, and give it up. Because we regret the whole business and know that nothing can be done about it, we retire like Solon to our private houses leaving our armor on the doorstep. The obvious danger is that we can become so busy trying to lead, or retreat from, the revolution that we stop thinking. And that is something we cannot do if what I agree to be the serious problems before this conference are to be understood and (save the mark) confronted.

Accordingly, I ask your leave to delete "social revolution" from my question and to replace it with something less ominous and more limited -- the "ideology of relevance." I will be discussing the meaning of the substitute in a moment. Finally, permit me to replace "is" with "should be" and I will be ready to begin my answer. I have no confidence whatever in my ability to state or predict the effect of the ideology of relevance on Humanistic Studies, but I do have some rather strong opinions of what it should be. Since I will have to pretend less with the latter, I prefer that it be at the focus of my remarks.

The question is now, "What should be the impact of the ideology of relevance on Humanistic Studies?" I will proceed as follows: First, I will provide what will have to be a crude statement of some traits of the ideology that bear directly upon the content and intellectual role of Humanistic Studies in higher education. I will say of these traits that at bottom they are clearly and dangerously anti-intellectual and, on the assumption that the Humanistic Studies are not, that they pose a threat to them. Then I will refer to some features of Humanistic Studies that make them special targets, and likely victims, of the threat. I will finally maintain, unfashionably, that there is nothing much to be done in the face of the threat than to stand firm.

I pass now to the nature of the ideology, the first trait of which I shall call that of "external justification." It is to be found in the literature of the New Left and on the lips of many of our students, and it is expressed in the currently voguish question, "What is the relevance of a liberal arts education, what is the relevance of this or that course in the curriculum, what is the relevance of teaching this or that course in this or that way?" The context of the question is most frequently one in which the curriculum or some element of it is under attack and where it is held that our society is beset with near-fatal maladies for which the courses or curriculum under consideration are not, but should be, palpable remedy.

In the context of its asking the question requires that courses be justified in the light of some showing to the effect that the giving of them will contribute to the amelioration or elimination of political and social evil. I call it "external justification" because it requires that what is done in a college is to be judged in respect of its effect upon the social order and, further, in respect of those effects that are external to, or independent of, the properties of education or learning, per se.

There are, of course, some things the doing of which we justify in this way. We take a bus because it gets us somewhere, not because of any value in the bus ride itself. (At least, that is why I take a bus.) We take an aspirin because it reduces our fever, not because the taking of it has any merit, per se. That is another way of saying that if aspirins did not succeed in reducing our fever, we would stop manufacturing and taking them. The anti-intellectualism of the view at issue lies in the fact that it leads us to talk about education as we do buses and aspirins, to try to find the cultural Florida which will justify the trip, the social fever which will justify swallowing the pill. But, of course, the pursuit of learning is not at all like this. The properties which make it what it is are identical with those which it make of value to the society in which it is pursued. If it is successful, the students who pursue it learn what is true and what is not, and how to find it out, and learn further there are different ways of finding it out according to subject-matter, and different degrees of certainty, which depending upon the subject-matter, they can attach to their findings. If we think that society is the better for having in it people who have learned these things, then education is relevant to society. If we don't, we talk of destinations and fevers.

This is why I find the question about the relevance of education to be so clearly anti-intellectual. There is an answer to the question. I have just given it. And the answer will be rejected as unresponsive exactly to the extent that knowledge and understanding, per se, are rejected as valueless. Since those who pose the question do find this answer unresponsive I have no doubt that the asking of it already reflects a repudiation of the intellectual life. One particularly good way of finding out what a person means by a question is to find out what he will be prepared to accept as appropriate answer.

This is why I maintain that what I have called the "trait of external justification" relegates intellectual inquiry, therefore its institutional setting, to the role of morally neutral instrument to be used, modified, or rejected, as we do any instrument, according to the purpose for which we take it up and of which it is logical servant.

Now to a second and related trait of the ideology of relevance, one that I shall call "tactical redescription." On this trait some of the fundamental qualities of education are redescribed as being less than morally neutral, as being of positive disvalue. The influential source in this case is Marcuse. The qualities in question are dialogue, toleration, and coming to conclusions in the light, and not in advance, of evidence and appropriate argument. Dialogue has to do with the fact that intellectual inquiry is necessarily public in character, its conclusions being couched in symbols that have public meaning, its methods of establishing them being testable in some way against experience. Toleration has to do with the fact that those who seek the truth are men, therefore fallible, and that, as a result, the intellectual arena must be one in which the widest possible scope is provided for argued dissent. The third of my fundamental qualities is, I think, self-explanatory.

Now, on the ideology of relevance, all these features are redescribed as tactical instruments which our society uses for the purpose of protecting itself

against the possibility of radical incursion. By always calling for analysis in advance of action, by insisting that judgment be withheld until the evidence is in, by requiring that all the viable alternatives be weighed, the intellectual enervates radical actions and perserves the vested interests of a society of which he is at once protector and beneficiary. Educational institutions, therefore, because built around these factors, are the most powerful of the weapons which a conservative society uses in the interests of defeating the radical. The first and last mistake which a radical can make, therefore, is to allow himself to be drawn into the form of intellectual exchange in which these factors are operative. He stops acting, starts talking, and he is lost.

The position is by definition to be anti-intellectual. The very attributes which are constituitive of the nature of intellectual inquiry are redescribed as tactical weapons so powerful and debilitating that the radical must reject them out of hand if he is to get on with his work.

There is much more to be said about these and other elements of the ideology of relevance, but I cannot say them here. I turn now to some properties of Humanistic Studies that make them special target and possible victim of the ideology. I will deal with two, one having to do with the subject matter of Humanistic Studies, the other, with the method. I remind you that in this discussion, I mean nothing more by "Humanistic Studies" than history, philosophy, literature, and the fine arts. That is not because I am unaware of some of the more resounding characterizations of what holds that group of disciplines together. I have heard of "man's fate," "the human condition," "the great visions and aspirations of human kind," and I explicitly wish to avoid that form of tub-thumping.

First, the subject matter. Humanistic Studies, having been the object of some considerable secular sermonizing, have been customarily viewed by those who come to them as having something important to do with the expression and communication of human values. Literature, it is said, expresses them, philosophy articulates them, history studies them, the plastic arts embody them. I am not here concerned with the question of whether this is true, or if true, whether Humanistic Studies can then be sharply differentiated from other substantive domains of inquiry. It is enough for my purpose that it is believed. For the belief that the subject matters in question are value-impregnated makes them an object of particular social concern to the ideology of relevance and, in particular, to the cluster of attitudes which express themselves in what I have called the trait of "external justification."

Let us begin with the assumption that what is wrong with our society has to do with the scheme of values to which we subscribe. Our cities burn in a war at home, our sons die in a war abroad, all this and more because our values have become so distorted that a concern for material acquisition and public order has replaced the emphasis on individual conscience and personal worth that were once the standard constituents of the liberal tradition.

Now if the quality of higher education is to be judged, as the ideology of relevance would have it, according to how well it makes political bread, and if what is politically needed is a reconstitution of our system of values, and if the subject matters of Humanistic Studies are peculiarly those in which values are expressed and communicated, then it becomes a matter of supreme importance that the materials to which students of Humanistic Studies be exposed be those which will bring about the desired reconstitution and the social

change on which it is dependent. That is why it is more important to read Baldwin rather than Homer, Aptheker than Genovese. To be clear, I am not at this point discussing the question of whether such changes are desirable, but why the Humanistic Studies can be seen by some as the educational fulcrum which, if moved, will bring them about.

There is also something about the methods of inquiry used in the Humanistic Studies that make them especially vulnerable to manipulation in the interests of fulfilling political objectives. They are, on the whole, less well articulated, less well subject to codification than those to be found in the factual sciences. The language is not quantitative, there are no knock-down proofs. The point is that because the methodology of Humanistic Studies is relatively less rigid than that of the empirical sciences it is easier to squeeze it into the desired political shape and more difficult to conclusively establish the where and how of the squeezing. It is more difficult to sell Lysenko than I Ching, easier to berate Styron than Einstein, easier to extol the virtues of Zen than those of Peracelsus.

The dangers are compounded by the second trait of the ideology -- that of tactical redescription. For that, you will recall, grew out of an impatience with the standard canons of intellectual analysis, regarding them as political weapons of the status quo requiring to be blunted in the interests of social change. It does not take much, therefore, if the will be present, and it is present, to convert what I consider to be the disciplined, albeit less precise and more fragile, modes of inquiry associated with Humanistic Studies into the kinds of exercises in myth-making which, for example, Professor Genovese has so brilliantly identified in the critiques The Confessions of Nat Turner.

I turn finally to the question of what is to be done about this, and I will give you an answer than I am absolutely certain you will regard as being as silly as it is drab. The answer is "nothing." Let me explain. I do not mean to suggest by it that what is now being done within Humanistic Studies is perfect, that there are no new topics to be considered, no new problems to be investigated, no new methods to be contrived which refine, supplement or replace what is already being done. Nor do I think it necessarily evil to have courses in Black history or the Literature of Revolution. What I do think is that there are no changes of this kind, large or small, that can at once satisfy what is demanded by the ideology of relevance and preserve the intellectual integrity of the material presented.

Suppose, for example, courses multiplied in the problems of contemporary America and of the world. Suppose we examine the music of the blues as it expressed these problems, the poetry of Tuli Kupferberg as it communicated them, the arts of "pop" and "op" as they embodied them, and added some work in history to tell us how it all came about. If we read something as old as the Iliad we would use it to raise the question of whether Achilles would have ridden round the Pentagon as he did the walls of Troy. It could be said, fairly, that there is nothing wrong and a good deal that is right in the intellectual scrutiny of our society, and even in engaging in a comparative analysis of the role of heroism in the Homeric and the modern world.

The curriculum might be skewed, but there have also been times when it was skewed wrongly in the other direction. The important thing is to treat the subjects properly, and since that can be done, a little imbalance in the curriculum is a small price to pay for a regimen of topics that will be able to re-engage the interests of our students. Perhaps so. Given my curriculum as described, I can think of worse things that have been done in the name of education.

My point, however, is something different. It is that whatever we did, we couldn't make the courses good enough or bad enough to satisfy those who want them. Not good enough, because they are asked for in the expectation that there is some course of studies which, if followed, will have the effect of overturning the values of those who partake of them and of the society of which they are part, and further, that all this is to happen at once. There is no such course of studies. That is, there is nothing that we can do that will be good enough.

They could also not be bad enough. For according to reasons I have already given, it is not enough to simply present contemporary, "relevant", materials. The ordering of them by the standard canons of logic and evidence, the dispassionate scrutiny of their features, the very things you will recall which enervate action, will be as objectionable as the courses in which the materials themselves would be exclusively traditional.

What is wanted, I believe, is nothing less than capitulation. And if that means that everything of intellectual worth in Humanistic Studies has to be sacrificed to the great God Relevance and converted into political vehicle, that will not be a problem. For those who perform the sacrifice will not think that anything of worth is being lost. They would, of course, preserve the label, "Intellectual Inquiry," for what is wanted is the prestige of that exercise and not the inconveniences involved in its actual practice. I believe it to be a capital mistake to think that we can give a little bit, that the bulk of work in Humanistic Studies will remain unimpaired, and that after a while, because the ideology of relevance is only a passing fad, it will all go away and we will return to our books, remembering fondly those few romantic hours before the barricades. Half a crumb does not satisfy a very large mouth. It stimulates the appetite.

I have to say that I am not very hopeful that institutions of higher learning will stand their ground. That is because for the first time the anti-intellectual attack on the academy is coming from those with whose substantive aims many, perhaps most, intellectuals sympathize. If we gave in to McCarthy or Velde, it was because we were afraid, not because we shared their political objectives. But most of us do agree that the war in Vietnam is a predatory adventure, that our government and major political parties have become increasingly immune to the sentiments of those they purportedly represent, that the conditions of the urban ghettos are execrable and the exploitation of the Black man shameless. And because academics so strongly sympathize with the political goals of the relevance ideologists, they cannot bring themselves to reject the demands which they bring to higher education out of the fear that by rejecting the educational demands they will be thought of as having repudiated the political goals.

These are strong words. I am afraid that some may find them offensive. But I say them because I think them to be true. I say them because I think that those of us who value Humanistic Studies, and indeed all of higher education, now have something to fight for, and against, and that unless we are clear about what is involved in the fight and respond with honor, we will be aiding those who think rather less of the academy than do we in the business of its dismantling. And if that, unhappily, were to happen, we would then no doubt hail what we have accomplished in the rubbery phrases of educational statemanship as "a creative and imaginative experiment in higher education."